Feminist aspect in *The Scarlet Letter*:

Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* presents a humanistic critique of the puritanical ethos, laws and social codes in the context of the seventeenth century New England society – against which the figure of the protagonist Hester Prynne has been presented whose character combines traditional ideas of feminine behavior with a free-thinking and rebellious perspective that can be seen as kind of precursor to later feminist philosophy.

In nineteenth-century America, if a group of people had even suggested the possibility of hearing a message concerning women's rights and liberation, they would most likely have been branded insane. When Nathaniel Hawthorne's most influential work, *The Scarlet Letter*, was published in 1850, most critics assessed that the novel presented the story of a woman's sinful rebellion against the institution of marriage and her deserved punishments. Later literary critics, however, in reexamining the work in light of twentieth-century feminism, arrive at different interpretations.

The first wave Feminist critics, like Virginia Woolf and Simone De Beauvoir upheld the scopes of relocating and redefining the position and representation of women in the conventional narratives promoting and dominated by a patriarchal ethos, while the critics pertaining to the second wave Feminism, such as Kate Millet and Elaine Showalter, purport the possibility and necessity of deconstructing the tropes used in the narratives of patriarchal canon so as to promote the voices of women – which these narratives always tend to suppress and trivialize. *The Scarlet Letter,* can be read as a pro-feminist critique of social morality and ethos of the particular spatial setting in which the story is situated.

The book's central character, the young woman, Hester Prynne commits adultery with a pastor named Arthur Dimmesdale in 1600's Puritan New England. The Puritans, on discovering Hester's guilt (though not Dimmesdale's), ostracize her by forcing her to wear a scarlet letter "A" on her breast, which labels her an adulterous. Hester also has to suffer with the knowledge that her husband, Roger Chillingworth, psychologically tortures Dimmesdale for his role in the affair. Under the punishment of the scarlet letter, Hester begins to assess her situation in light of women's liberty, while at the same time raising her daughter, Pearl. She considers not only why she is being punished by her neighbors but also what to do with the feelings she is experiencing as a woman who desires her voice to be heard.

Although she did not commit the adultery alone, she refused to tell her lover's name. **"Woman, transgress not beyond the limits of Heaven's mercy!"** Cried the Reverend Mr. Wilson, more harshly than before. He said, **"That little babe hath been gifted with a voice to second and confirm the counsel which thou hast heard. Speak out the name! That, and thy repentance, may avail to take the scarlet letter off thy breast".**

"Never!" replied Hester Prynne, looking, not at Mr. Wilson, but into the deep and troubled eyes of the younger clergymen. **"It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!"**

It can be seen how determined was Hester. It did not matter how many times they assaulted her she did not answer. She tried to protect her lover even if that meant to suffer alone. She fought against the expectations. She denied being the woman who the society wanted. She stood out for herself and protected her love alone. After her term of imprisonment was over, Hester was free to go anywhere in the world, yet she did not leave Boston. Instead of leaving the whole situation behind her, she chose to move into a small, seaside cottage on the outskirts of town. She did not run away from her punishment, she was stronger and braver then just simply giving up.

She supported herself and Pearl through her skill as a seamstress. She worked and financed her and her daughter's life alone without men's help. She made ends meet alone. Her work was in great demand for clothing worn at official ceremonies and among the fashionable women of the town — for every occasion except a wedding. That was a sign that the society did not forgive her. Hester was still a social outcast. The target of vicious abuse by the community, she endured the abuse patiently.

As she was alienated from the rest of the community, she became contemplative. Hester started to speculate on human nature, social organization, and larger moral questions. Hester's tribulations also led her to be stoic and a freethinker. In the 1600s it was not common that women had opinion about life, society, religion. Hester went against the idea that women's only task is to maintain the household and raise the children. Hester had her own opinion and viewpoint about life.

Above all the difficulties one of the most serious situations and biggest problems in Hester's life was the case when the governor determined to take Pearl away from her. That was the third time when it seems that Hester had to fight alone with the circumstances again. In order to press further with assurances of Pearl's good care, Hester defiantly pleaded with him, **"God gave her into my keeping,"** repeated Hester Prynne, raising her voice almost to a shriek. **"I will not give her up!"**

Here Hester turns to Dimmesdale for help, who spoke in her defense. That was the only time in the novel when and where she did not stand alone. However her determination and lonely stand was repeated again when she confronts Governor Bellingham over the issue of Pearl's guardianship.

When times went on the nature of the letter "A" seems to change. Throughout the novel it is mentioned the letter became more elegant and glamorous. At first it was meant for a punishment, but later society began to see the letter as something beautiful, because it seemed to have set Hester free. The narrator describes:

"The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her- so much power to do and power to sympathize- that many people refused to interpret the scarlet "A" by its original signification. They said that it meant "Able"; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength."

Furthermore despite the scarlet letter, Hester proved that she is full of strength, compassion, and honesty. She was given credit for bearing her shame with courage, and her life had been one of purity since Pearl's birth. Hester only tried to survive, but she could reach something bigger and better. She became an independent woman who is respected by the society, a society which had strict rules, morals, ethics, and at first sentenced her. Hester's position rose also because of her charity. But this kind of life and that new reputation came with a price. She did not have friends, passion, love or affection. Through a lot of sacrifices and struggles Hester forged a new place for herself on the edge of Puritan society.

After the two most important men in her life died- Dimmesdale died after his public confession and Chillingworth died consumed by his own hatred and revenge- she moved to another country with her daughter, but years gone and Hester returned to Boston. She only found her real life in New England. Her struggling life connected her to this town. "…, the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too."

That action also proves that Hester never gave up. She always fought and tried to do the best to gain forgiveness from God. Hester lived on, quietly, and became something of a legend in the colony of Boston. The scarlet letter made her what she became, and, in the end, she grew stronger and more at peace through her suffering.

By the end of the novel the letter "A" came to be seen as a symbol of the mysterious connection between human experiences and a kind of wisdom which can be reached only by failure. Wisdom is gained from human experiences, most notably mistakes. Hester committed

the sin of adultery. From that sin we were shown what kind of courage, honesty, and strength she has inside her.

All in all it is proved that Hester Prynne is a feminist figure. Although she did not become feminist deliberately, but the life and circumstances forced her to fight alone and stand alone in a very strict society. She was able to survive, maintain a proper life, earn money, do the housework and raise her child alone, without men's support. She also managed to fray out respect in the society and reach that they forget her sin and see the precious, strong, individual woman in her who could do and reach everything she wants. She also set up a good example for the following generations how to stand alone, fight alone in a men ruled society. She proved that women are able to get on in life without men. Women also can draw on from her strength and courage.

Thus Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is truly pro-feminist work. Interestingly enough, the first wave of feminism began in the United States not long after the initial publication of the novel. By 1920, women had gained the right to vote and the concept of "the New Woman" had emerged, popularized by the renowned British-American author Henry James, who was, unsurprisingly, a fan of Hawthorne's work. With these facts in mind, one could hypothesize that by writing T*he Scarlet Letter* and including the strong-willed Hester Prynne as the protagonist, Hawthorne inadvertently (or perhaps purposefully) helped to pave the way for feminists to come.

CHAYAN DUTTA